United Nations E/CN.6/2004/NGO/15

# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
16 January 2004

Original: English

**Commission on the Status of Women**
**Forty-eighth session**
1-12 March 2004
Item 3 (c) (ii) of the provisional agenda*
**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building**

## Statement submitted by the World Veterans Federation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

* * *

* E/CN.6/2004/1.

04-21208 (E) 090204

The World Veterans Federation (WVF), founded in 1950 following the end of World War II, is an international non-governmental organization which brings together those who have experienced war, either as combatants, prisoners of war or as civilian victims of war. Our members represent those who have fought and suffered together or on opposite sides who are committed to helping build a more peaceful, just and free world and are dedicated the principles of the United Nations charter and to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We are pleased that the Commission has chosen as one of its thematic issues for its 48th session the topic: "women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building". Current wars are internal ones - ethnic, cultural, religious, economic conflicts – in which civilian women and children represent 90% of the casualties. Though ending conflicts is a major challenge to the United Nations, building a lasting peace has becomes as important an undertaking. After an armed conflict, it is essential to address the rehabilitation and reintegration of the veterans and civilian victims not only for humanitarian reasons but also to lay the foundations for future stable, law-abiding societies.

At its 24th General Assembly held in South Africa in December 2003 WVF passed a resolution recognizing "**that past experience of war veterans has shown that it is extremely difficult to overcome the consequences of war and that considerable financial and scientific support is required from parties involved and the international community help bring solutions to physical and psychological handicaps…"**

The World Veterans Federation early on, concerned about the situation and status of war veterans, had developed a document , "*Guidelines to Basic Rights for War Veterans and Victims of War"* that governments could use as a basis for legislation to address the various personal, social and economic problems of war veterans which hampered their reintegration into society. In the nineties, the WVF recognizing the changed nature of conflicts which saw 90% of casualties were civilians, revised its "*Guidelines to Basic Rights for War Veterans and Victims of War* to include "civilian victims of war". The Preamble states: "*these recommendations also take into account the changes in the nature of armed conflicts: the steadily increasing numbers of the resulting civilian victims of war, especially women and children, and the problems that the persons serving in the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces are facing."*

**Women Experience War Differently** - When the WVF recognized that women experience war differently than men, it created a Committee in 1984 to focus on the meaning and consequences of war

for women and how the WVF could best address them. This Committee on Women has raised the consciousness of the entire membership of WVF as to the terrible injustices and sufferings of women because of their gender during and after armed conflicts. The W VF since has become a champion of the universality of the human rights of women , frequently testifying at UN conferences and meetings. One issue that the WVF has given leadership is the case of the "comfort women" of World War II – the Asian women who were treated as sexual slaves by the advancing Japanese army -which has been thoroughly documented by the UN.

The experiences of the "comfort women" during World War II were not unique. Last year, UN Undersecretary General for Peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guehenno pointed out to the Security Council that women and girls suffered disproportionately during and after war, as existing inequalities were magnified and social networks broke down, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. The Council condemned continuing violations of the human rights of women and girls in conflict situations and also recognized the vital role of women in promoting peace. Member states were urged to increase the participation of women at decision making levels, as called for in Resolution 1325 which reaffirmed the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in postwar reconstruction.

**Expert Group Meeting.** – We are pleased that the UN DAW- convened Expert Group meeting Nov. 10-13, 2003, in Ottawa focused on "**peace agreements as a means for promoting gender equality and insuring participation of women".** The Aide Memoire and background documents are valuable resources for the Commission. Women's participation in peace negotiations are crucial if women are to be play the roles in peace keeping and peace building actions that Resolution 1325 calls for. It is essential that women's voices be heard early on in the process so that their interests are included as new or revised legal and political structures emerge from the chaos of war-torn societies. History teaches us that from the ashes of war rebuilt societies emerge that may or may not improve the status of women. The landscape changes, but unless there is careful planning, old inequalities restricting women's rights may persist.

**Women Experience Peace Differently -** Just as women mostly experience war differently than men, they experience the subsequent peace differently as well. Not only are they more likely to be civilians, hence, the bulk of the casualties, but their pre-war status and limitations diminish their legal rights. Besides displacement, deprivation , loss of family and/or provider, women suffer rape and other sexual violence, and are victims of abductions and trafficking . They may be stateless, refugees, without legal identity , without the protection of any national or international entity. They often have to reconstitute their lives without the support of family or community.

The need for rehabilitative and reintegrative services for male soldiers is generally accepted, even if there are great variations as to how much help the state can provide. There is however much less recognition that women impacted by war need assistance and benefits. Many suffer disabilities, malnutrition, reproductive illnesses, PTSD or other psychological ailments. Without preparation, they ar thrust into roles as providers and/or heads of household, with many others dependent upon them. Their financial and economic situations may be desperate. Yet these victims of war are not seen as requiring assistance in reintegrating into society.

Especially desperate are the women and girls who suffered sexual violence. A psychiatrist investigating the impacts of the invasion of Kuwait on the population in the first Gulf War, suggested tha if rape were acknowledged as a **war-injury**, it might be more successfully treated. In societies where rape is shameful or the victim is blamed, the crime is often not even acknowledged. Even if a legal remedy is available, often women and girls would not agree to testify or admit that they had been violate – the ostracism they would suffer would be too high a price. With the creation of the International Criminal Court (which was long sought by the WVF), and its characterization of rape as a war crime , hopefully, the impunity that too long attended such crimes will be eliminated, lessening its future occurrence.

During legislation conferences that the World Veterans Federation has sponsored to better acquaint governments with the needs of their veterans and civilian victims , we have come across a number of instances where women's war-connected disabilities are either ignored, or given minimal attention.. Another omission is the lack of benefits for the wives, daughters, and mothers who serve as a full-time "nurse" and caretaker for a disabled veteran. Although these women's lives have been totally disrupted and shrunk , they are not seen as victims of war and are ineligible for benefits or services.

**Experiences Change Women** - Women are often changed by their war-related experiences and emerge from their ordeals with new strengths and expectations, unwilling to accept injustice, inequality and discrimination in all aspects of their personal, social and economic lives. Many find within themselves capabilities they did not know they had. Some develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills. As one woman once put it: " After what I have done and seen, I am not going back to the broom closet." The women wh › fought in liberation movements or colonial wars took on men's roles successfully and served with equal distinction. These women are empowered and resistant to returning to a status quo ant

**Opportunity for Change** - A peace process whose goal is to restore a failed state or put back together the pieces of a destroyed state, presents an opportunity to embark on a journey, often difficult, c

societal transformation through changes in laws and institutions. When women are part of the peace negotiations and have roles in the post war reconstruction process, there is the chance to mold a different future than the past. In more than one case when war ends, men who had accepted women as equals during the fighting reverse course and push women out of the leadership roles they had filled. Women are expected to return to the status quo ante, second class citizens, bereft of their human rights, in an unequal and repressive social and political environment. Women who were in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, in the African National Congress, and other conflicts where women had served in a great many different capacities, have attested to this development, as have American and British women who were in military and home forces, and war-support industries during World War I and World War II.

. .

**Afghan Experience -** The recent convening of a Loya Jirga in Afghanistan to write a new constitution which will lay the groundwork for a reconstituted post-war society demonstrates the importance of women being involved early on in the reconstruction process. Afghan women and their supporters sought wording in the new constitution that would restore the equal rights of women which had been abrogated by the Taliban . Though there was precedent in previous Afghan constitutions for such wording, substantial resistance came from extremist elements(including militant armed war lords) to undermine efforts to institutionalize women's rights. An Afghan woman leader reports that Afghan women supported by some men, finally persuaded a majority of delegates to enshrine women's rights once more into the Constitution, even mandating a minimum number of women from each province to be elected. If these rights had not been written into the Constitution, women's future roles and rights would have been circumscribed .

**Role of Men and Boys -** The WVF is also pleased to support the other thematic issue under consideration by the Commission this year: "**Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality"** As a human rights organization dedicated to gender equality, the WVF through its policies and actions translates its philosophy by supporting ,in all areas of life, a true **partnership** between men and women. With the bulk of its membership men, WVF provides a realistic model for a dynamic partnership of men and women working together for human rights and peace. Member organizations are encouraged to translate the WVF positions by providing leadership in their own countries.

Among the major issues WVF has endorsed are reinforcing and building a consensus for the universality of the human rights of women. The organization has passed dozens of resolutions supporting women's drive for equality, hailing the Beijing Platform for Action and ending discrimination against

women in all areas of political, social and economic life. WVF has consistently endorsed UNESCO's initiatives on behalf of a "Culture of Peace, calling upon its member associations to join in and initiate projects and programs on a local level that would expand the goals of this important venture. In October 2002, the WVF Standing Committee on European Affairs held a Seminar on the "*Culture of Peace and the Dialogue Among Civilizations*". WVF has made its views known in the international community through representation at the United Nations and its agencies and within the NGO community.

Even without a so-called "critical mass", women have played more and more important roles in every area of WVF activity, including leadership at the highest levels, serving on the Council and the Executive Board of the organization. Most of WVF's regional committees have working groups on women; their meetings more and more have focused on the status and situation of women, particularly those who have been impacted by wars. By emphasizing the partnership of men and women within the organization, it has fostered partnerships in other venues. The WVF has evolved into a champion for all women's full human rights, working in harmony with women's organizations and other NGOs as the key issues of concern to women during the eighties and nineties were debated within the UN and the rest of the international community.

Recent resolutions passed by WVF reveal this strong commitment:

**"WVF condemns all violations of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict....Expresses the hope that in the near future all the countries in the world will have to participate and seek proper and effectives responses through the UN and specialized agencies and the international NGO's concerned to eliminate the violation of the rights of women in war time, emphasizing the need for appropriate systems and special compensation for the victims..."**

**"Considering that pensions and allowances granted to widows and dependents of war veterans and war disabled are insufficient and do not enable them to meet their needs...Urges...those governments concerned to introduce legislative measures that would guarantee pensions and allowances and harmonize legal provisions in order to avoid inequalities.....**

**(Re The International Criminal Court) " WVF...urges the member associations to be strong advocates for gender justice so that gender-based crimes against women will be prosecuted with the same dedication as other crimes and no exemptions would be allowed for religious or cultural reasons...."**